



Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse and by Rhine – initiator and patron of Jugendstil (Art Nouveau) in Hesse

Hans-Günther Patzke, Historian, Ernst-Ludwig-Gymnasium, Bad Nauheim

If we speak of patrons of art in our time, we mainly think of public institutions, industrial firms and wealthy citizens. There was, of course, art patronage by municipal councils and patrician families in earlier times, too, but up to the early twentieth century it was the aristocracy and above all monarchs who were leading in this field in Germany. Loss of importance and decreasing financial resources then led to a continuous decline of princely patronage of art.

Among the German princes who around 1900 still regarded patronage of art as one of their noblest tasks Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse and by Rhine played a prominent role because of his encouragement and support of Jugendstil, the German equivalent of Art Nouveau. Thanks to his instigation and promotion during his reign – 1892 to 1918 – Darmstadt, his capital, developed into a centre of modern art of European rank.

To understand Ernst Ludwig's role as a patron of Jugendstil appropriately, it is necessary to have a closer look at his personality as a whole, including the historical and family circumstances which determined his thinking and his actions.

The territory ruled by Ernst Ludwig, the Grand Duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt, was one of the 25 federal states which made up the German Empire before World War I. Although the governmental powers of the Hessian Grand Dukes had been considerably reduced by the integration of Hesse into the German Empire in 1871, their European family connections due to numerous marriages with members of the great European dynasties, especially with the Russian Tsars and the royalties in Great Britain gave the Hessian grand dukes a special position among the German princes.

What impressed many of his contemporaries more than Ernst Ludwig's high international standing were other traits of his personality. First of all it was Ernst Ludwig's progressive way of thinking, his open-mindedness towards liberal ideas and new de-

velopments in different fields of life, attitudes which made him popular among those who were dissatisfied with the conservative trends dominating social and political life in Germany before World War I. Statements of competent authorities prove how positively Ernst Ludwig was judged. So Prof. Dr. Theodor Heuss, President of the young Federal Republic of Germany in the fifties, stated: "To us, when we were young, the 20th century – as a promise and task – actually began in Darmstadt. For our youthful consciousness Hesse's last Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig was the spiritually and intellectually most important personality among the German monarchs in his time. The Hessian Grand Duke was obviously in his way of thinking what we call an avant-gardist."

The high esteem, as it is expressed here, was justified by how Ernst Ludwig practised and looked at his tasks as a reigning prince. His thoughts are laid down in a series of notes like his memoirs and the "Fundamental ideas of a constitutional prince". Ernst Ludwig no longer believed in an inherited divine right of monarchs. In his opinion a reigning prince every day had to prove his abilities to reign his country just as anybody else had to justify his social position by personal achievements.

Ernst Ludwig recognized that he lived on the threshold of a new era involving rapid technical changes. "If we don't keep pace with these changes" – so his words – "we will be passed over or disregarded as outdated". The uppermost duties of a reigning prince were – to him - to see to the improvement of the conditions of life in his country and to motivate people to accept innovations. Promising new possibilities he saw in the sphere of electricity and in the development of the motor-car. In this respect he cultivated a close relationship with the owners of the Opel factory in Rüsselsheim, and it was him who persuaded them to take up the production of motor-cars at a time when this new invention was still regarded with scepticism. He was a passionate driver of Opel cars, and the firm's most successful propagandist. Besides he supported the health care measures and the charitable work of his wife who continued his mother Alice's activities in this sphere.

He often criticized his princely colleagues for their antiquated way of thinking. "When I stayed in Berlin on the occasion of the Kaiser's birthday", we read in his memoirs, "I realized that many of my colleagues were so backward in their views that I felt like a socialist". He surely did not use the word " socialist" contemptuously. Unlike his cousin, the Kaiser, who blamed social democrats as "unpatriotic fellows", Ernst Ludwig dealt with politicians of that party in a respectful way. No wonder that in conservative circles he was denounced as "a revolutionary prince", "the red Grand Duke".

Ernst Ludwig had grown up in a family strongly attached to arts and music. It was mainly his mother Alice, daughter of Queen Victoria of Great Britain, to whom he owed his social sensitivity and above all his artistic inclinations, and whose education and example shaped his philosophy of life. Important for his progressive and liberal ideas, for the broadening of his horizon were his international contacts especially with England. After his mother's early death, it was Queen Victoria of Great Britain who took him under her wing. Among her 40 grandchildren Ernst Ludwig is said to have been her favourite grandson. The old lady came to Darmstadt every two or three years. Still more frequently Ernst Ludwig visited England, which was something like a second homeland to him. To Golo Mann Ernst Ludwig was a combination of an English-European gentleman and a German patriot, without nationalistic implications.

There was a logical connection between his progressive thinking and his extraordinary commitment to modern arts. As already mentioned, the integration of the Grand Duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt into the German Empire had left little political power to the grand dukes. Most of the laws and administrative regulations practised in the grand duchy were made in Berlin. This allowed Ernst Ludwig to devote himself extensively to the cultural and economic development of his country and the patronage of modern arts. "My Hessen may flourish, and in it the arts" was his motto, and he unwaveringly stuck to it in spite of the fact that the financial means the Grand Duke had at his disposal were limited compared to what rich towns like Frankfurt, München, Berlin, Dresden could spend on art.

From the very beginning of his reign in 1892, Ernst Ludwig left no doubt that he intended to have an essential say in matters of arts and good taste. So he at once rejected the plans for the new state museum in Darmstadt as ugly and an eyesore to Darmstadt, and had them altered by a young architect of his own choice (Alfred Messel). Only a few years later – in 1897 - he for the first time openly manifested his preference for Jugendstil when he had part of his Neues Palais decorated and furnished in modern style. What fascinated him about the Jugendstil movement was above all the idea of a reform of life under the influence of the arts.

Ernst Ludwig's reputation as a patron of modern art is especially connected with the KÜNSTLERKOLONIE, i.e. the artists' colony, which he founded on the Mathildenhöhe in the park area around the Russian Chapel in Darmstadt in 1899. He invited architects, sculptors, ceramicists and graphic artists to join the artists' community which

should give them the opportunity to realize their individual ideas. Between 1899 and 1914 twenty-three artists worked together on the Mathildenhöhe for a shorter or longer time, among them such renowned personalities as Peter Behrens, Hans Christiansen, and Joseph Maria Olbrich. It was Olbrich in whom the Grand Duke found a like-minded, congenial partner and who till his sudden death in 1908 was in some respect the head of the artists' colony.

What distinguished the Darmstadt artists' colony from other artists' colonies was that by creating new forms of architecture and decorative design – on the premise of Jugendstil - it should be a driving force for the development of the country's crafts, and so also be of benefit to the industrial progress of Hesse. As the Grand Duke rejected the hierarchical distinction between high arts and applied arts, he wanted the artists to give practical impulses to the crafts to take up innovative ideas. That did not mean that they should imitate Jugendstil designs of the Mathildenhöhe slavishly. The Grand Duke rather expected this kind of relation to help to bring about an autonomous Darmstadt Jugendstil.

Ernst Ludwig's role in the artists' colony was not that of a passive observer. He accompanied the artists' work with his advice and proposals and discussed many of their plans with them. The artists obviously did not feel his suggestions as orders. Ernst Ludwig described this cooperation as a wonderful time. "Being young myself, I could understand the sometimes highflying ideas of those young men. They were often confronted with opposition, and I could help them to overcome narrow-minded intrigues".

Highlights of the artists' colony were four exhibitions between 1901 and 1914, at which the artists could present the results of their work to a broader public. In 1901, it was the Ernst-Ludwig-House, the artists' common atelier house, and the dwelling houses of the artists with their Jugendstil furnishings which were the main objects of interest. They were meant as model houses showing how architecture, interior design, applied art and painting could be brought together as Gesamtkunstwerke, and so make a new form of cultivated living possible. The Grand Duke commented that it was fascinating to see how much comfort and grace could be attained if art and good taste showed the way".

Among Olbrich's probably best achievements after the first exhibition are reckoned works created at the personal request of the Grand Duke, especially – in 1902 - the

playhouse in the park of Wolfsgarten for Ernst Ludwig's little daughter Elisabeth, the only child from his first – unhappy – marriage with Mellita of Saxe-Coburg. The little princess's death only a year later was a serious stroke to the Grand Duke.

The following exhibitions showed the gradual development of several artists away from the revolutionary, eccentric forms of early Jugendstil to more moderate, maturer forms with approaches to a new classicism, a development that can be noticed at the Jugendstil buildings in Bad Nauheim as well. Besides the artists tried to react to the criticism of the elitist luxury in which the artists' houses of the exhibition in 1901 were furnished. So a workers' village was to show that even cheap houses did not need to do without artistic embellishments. What aroused special admiration at the third, the "Hesse State Exhibition for Free and Applied Art", in 1908 was a large new exhibition building and the wedding tower designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich as Darmstadt's present to Ernst Ludwig and his second wife Eleonore of Solms-Hohensolms-Lich on the occasion of their wedding.

That the Grand Duke's idea of a close collaboration between arts and crafts was no utopian dream, was for the first time manifested by the so-called "Darmstadt Room", designed by Olbrich, produced by the furniture factory Glückert, and exhibited at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900. In the following years, more producing firms (furniture, pianos, textiles etc.) modelled their products on designs of the artists' colony, and the Grand Duke tried to foster the collaboration by founding enterprises of his own like the "Grand Ducal Ceramic Manufactory" under the direction of Jakob Julius Scharvogel.

Outside Darmstadt it was mainly Bad Nauheim that profited from Ernst Ludwig's far-sighted way of thinking and his artistic ambitions. From Celtic times the area of Nauheim had been a place where salt water springs allowed profitable salt production. After the curative powers of salt water baths had been rediscovered, Nauheim became an internationally renowned health resort, mainly for heart and circulatory complaints with a growing popularity in aristocratic and bourgeois well-to-do circles. But around 1900 the conditions of the spa facilities no longer came up to the demands of the spa guests: the few bathhouses could not cope with the growing number of patients, the houses were scattered over a wide area, their equipment was outmoded. Ernst Ludwig recognized the danger that more and more of the well-paying guests would move to better equipped spas if the facilities in Bad Nauheim were not enlarged and modernized. "For a long time", he said in his memoirs, "I have felt that the gov-

ernment hasn't done enough for Bad Nauheim. I had to struggle hard with the government because I could not convince the ministers that you must invest a lot in an enterprise before you can hope that it will yield profit."

The planning of the building works was entrusted to an ingenious young architect, Wilhelm Jost. His concept was to pull down everything that was outmoded and to replace it with an extended complex of new buildings technically and aesthetically modern. Jost was no friend of radical modernism, but nevertheless open to quite a lot of aspects of Jugendstil. He claimed that modern building should be a synthesis of approved traditional forms and elements of modern design, and so he was near Ernst Ludwig's expectations who favoured stylistic concepts that tried to harmonize new influences with traditional forms of art, to "incorporate the good of the past into the aspirations of the future".

How such a concept could materialize can be seen by Jost's main project in Bad Nauheim, the Sprudelhof, fountain courtyard (1905 – 1911). With its symmetrical layout and its neo-baroque architecture it rather reminds of an 18th century palace than of a Jugendstil building. But the architecture is superimposed by quite a lot of Jugendstil elements like the curving roofs, the wave and water bubble patterns, the portal frames and the stained glass windows.

Visitors who enter the houses behind the long arcades and cast more than a short glance at the interior cannot be but fascinated by the way in which - in contrast to the outside - Jugendstil design dominates in the waiting halls as well as in the inner decorative courtyards and in the bath cubicles. It was due to the Grand Duke's initiative that also members of the artists' colony in Darmstadt were commissioned to contribute to the ornamental decoration and the furnishing of the interiors of the bathhouses. The collaboration between Jost and artists like the sculptor Heinrich Jobst, the ceramic designer Jacob Julius Scharvogel and others brought about masterpieces of Jugendstil. The results can be mainly admired in Bathhouse 7, whose interior – with Scharvogel's ceramic works - was displayed at the Hessian State Exhibition of 1908. Art historians judge that the creation of the Sprudelhof in Bad Nauheim is perhaps the most convincing example of how Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig's patronage raised the quality of applied art. At the same time the Jugendstil buildings in Bad Nauheim are a successful realization of Ernst Ludwig's ideal of combining the beautiful with the practically useful.

Ernst Ludwig followed the construction works in Bad Nauheim with the discerning eye of an expert. It was with the Trinkkuranlage, pump room complex, - 1910 –1911 - that Ernst Ludwig partly interfered in the planning, but Jost stated later that like Olbrich he had profited from the Grand Duke's architectural suggestions. They helped him to create what was later regarded as a harmonious unit: cure spring temple – milk-drinking hall opposite each other, and the music pavilion with a water basin in between.

Ernst Ludwig proved his personal interest in Bad Nauheim by frequent visits to the town, not only to see relatives taking the waters there like Empress Elisabeth of Austria in 1898, and Tsar Nikolaus II and Tsarina Alexandra of Russia, Ernst Ludwig's sister, in 1910, but also in order to inspect the progress of building. He came over from his castle in Friedberg, sometimes – as the local press reports - by bike, moving about incognito.

Bad Nauheim's development into a Jugendstil spa would not have been possible without the initiative of Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig. The buildings which were erected in the spa town between 1901 and 1911 (there were several other projects realized at the suggestion of Ernst Ludwig, besides the fountain court and the pump room complex) considerably mark the townscape still today. The names of an avenue, of a mineral spring and of Bad Nauheim's grammar school of 1905 still remind of the spa town's greatest benefactor.

Ernst Ludwig not only fostered the arts of his time. Under his influence Hesse as the first German state got a *Denkmalschutzgesetz* securing the conservation and restoration of historical buildings.

After all that it must not be ignored that Ernst Ludwig proved his artistic talents in more than what had been described so far. He painted, wrote poems in German and English, composed pieces of music and especially did a lot in the field of theatrical productions. He designed properties and costumes for theatre performances and influenced the stagings at the Darmstadt Opera House.

Ernst Ludwig's dethronement in the wake of the November Revolution of 1918 did not in the least diminish his popularity in Hesse, but it meant the end of the artists' colony and its exhibitions, as the greatest part of the money for the colony had been paid from the Grand Duke's budget. In the following decades the recognition of the results

of Ernst Ludwig's initiatives especially in connection with the artists' colony suffered from the widespread decline of interest in Jugendstil. It is mainly due to the activities of art historians, institutions and Jugendstil associations that today the achievements of Ernst Ludwig and the artists supported by him again get the appreciation and admiration they deserve.

Ernst Ludwig died on October 9th, 1937 in Wolfsgarten near Darmstadt - about a month before a tragic fate befell his family: his wife Eleonore, their eldest son and his wife, sister of the present Duke of Edinburgh, and their two young sons perished in a plane crash near Oostende on November 16th, 1937.